

## The Vardy Museums

*(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 2, 2012)*

When I visited Vardy, Tennessee a few weeks ago to meet DruAnna Williams Overbay and learn about the Melungeon settlement there in Hancock, County, I knew it as close to Virginia. However, I did not realize just how close Vardy was to the Virginia and Tennessee state line.

DruAnna wrote, "Vardy is basically on the Tennessee and Virginia border. Lee County Virginia begins at the top of Powell Mountain behind the church. Vardy Valley runs into Blackwater, VA and that state line begins down the road only two miles away. So, geographically speaking, the community really runs into Virginia. It is snuggled between Newman's Ridge and Powell Mountain."

The purpose for my visit was to let Fred Eiler, my good friend who first introduced me to the Peak Cemetery and then to DruAnna, show me a treasure he had found. I was sure it would be a good day trip, but was not prepared for the level of interest in the Melungeons this trip generated for me.

Nor was I prepared for the large number of phone calls and emails I received after publishing the first article that mentioned "Melungeons" in the headline of the article. There are many people who are intensely interested in the research into the ancestry that has led to a group of people generally known as Melungeons.

Of the many who called, Cleland Thorpe of Corbin, KY, was most helpful. He discussed the various studies of which he was aware and noted a dissertation submitted to Michigan State University by Richard Allen Carlson, Jr. He was so kind as to send me a copy. Amazing material! I was introduced to another new group of people for me, the Salyersville Indians.

I am just beginning to read this dissertation and already see a connection to Melungeons. I want to read a bit more before calling Richard Carlson. In a chapter titled, "Malungain Indians' and an Interloper at Vardy's Springs," the term "Melungeon" with variations in spelling was applied first to a composite Indian population of "Saponi, Cherokee and other tribal heritages."

Carlson continues that this mixed tribal heritage was the reason for the term being applied to the Indian population. He continues, "By 1840, however, this external label of 'Malungeon' was no longer linked to the tribal or ethnic diversity, but was more overtly tied with attitudes regarding mixed 'racial' heritage.

Carlson concludes his thoughts on this by saying, "Used with more derogatory applications, this latter use of the label 'Melungeon' would nearly coincide with the national climate of the Indian removal era and the passing of strict new state laws restricting the rights of Indians, blacks, and people of mixed racial ancestry."

As I interact with Richard Carlson, we will pursue his dissertation more fully.

Now, let's go back to the trip to Vardy. Fred and I arrived just after lunch and DruAnna met us. This is almost no parking for the Vardy Museums, so we just pulled off the road into the grass. On the Southeast side of the single road running up the Vardy Valley sits an exceptional log cabin.

The Mahala Mullins log cabin has been transported from its original location atop Newman's Ridge to the floor of the Vardy Valley just across the road from the Presbyterian Church and the site of the Vardy School. Mahala Mullins, who lived from 1824 to 1898, has become a character that is now a part of the folklore of Melungeons.

She was actually a kind and sweet soul afflicted with elephantiasis who became so large that she could not get through the door of her bedroom. She was ultimately buried in her bed just outside the location of her cabin when she died. This was accomplished by taking the logs out of the corner of her cabin to remove her from her confined bedroom.

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It is rumored, and with enough consistency to convince one of the truth of it, that she was a moonshiner. There is also a story that her log cabin straddled the Virginia and Tennessee state line with two doors on her bedroom a person could enter from one state and leave into the other.

A story is told about Hancock County Sheriff George Washington Edds who attempted to arrest Mahalia Mullins during her heyday of moonshining. He traveled to her cabin and confronted her with the charge of selling moonshine. She did not deny it, but said to the Sheriff, "I would gladly go with you, but I can't get through the door."

The Sheriff is said to have returned to the Judge Tyler and told him, "She is catchable, but she ain't fetchable!" Many other stories exist about the legendary Mahala Collins Mullins.

The Mahala Mullins cabin has been rebuilt in the Vardy Valley near the church and site of the Vardy School. It houses numerous historic artifacts that have been collected from various sources and locations. Each artifact has a story. Each room is decorated with period furniture and glassware. DruAnna tells stories about many of the artifacts, citing their origin and how they came to be a part of this unusual museum.

Many unusual artifacts exist in the log cabin turned museum from a most unusual set of arched windows, that is right, arched windows in a log cabin...unusual, huh, to intricate woven baskets, each nook brings another artifact with a story.

In one of the upstairs rooms is a mock-up of a five student reading classroom, which DruAnna learned in college is the ideal size for teaching reading. The Vardy School knew that.

The upper boy's bedroom of the cabin still has the original wood flooring. There is a bed in the cabin that is very similar to the one in which Mahalia was buried. The hand-hewed logs are distinctive and well preserved. Touring the cabin is an adventure in itself.

There is a marker for the Vardy Community School which has fallen down and is being recaptured by the woods. The plaque is left as "A Memorial to the Spiritual Leaders, Teachers, Staff, and Students." This school was well ahead of other schools during its time.

There is a model of the Vardy School inside the Presbyterian Church. The church contains many historic artifacts as well. These range from photos of Melungeons who have gone on from Vardy to make good. There is also a series of photographs of the Vardy Community School showing its history.

A visit to the Vardy Museums hosted by DruAnna Williams Overbay is a treat, for sure.

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Mahalia Mullins log cabin

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Model of the Vardy Community School